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EARLY LITERACY SUPPORT DELIVERS IN VOLUMES

First 5 Shasta and The McConnell Foundation Forge Million Dollar Partnership

(Redding)-----Young children will soon begin toting bright red book bags home from child care locations across Shasta County. The literary treasures contained in those bags will be provided through the *Raising A Reader* early literacy program, a take-home rotational book bag program that promotes daily reading between parents and children. A \$1,050,000 partnership forged between First 5 Shasta and The McConnell Foundation will fund this four-year program designed to serve more than 6,800 children, from infancy through age 5.

Raising A Reader addresses a documented need for effective early literacy support. As of 2003, 53 per cent of Shasta County children began kindergarten without basic knowledge of numbers, letters and words, colors and shapes, all of which are essential pre-reading skills. Nationally, it is reported that one in three children enter kindergarten lacking these basic skills. These statistics cut across all socio-economic lines and can interfere with children ever developing strong reading skills.

Parents and children participating in the *Raising A Reader* program will enjoy a regular routine of reading. Child care providers will take responsibility for sending books home with children on a weekly basis. Parents will receive an introduction to the program and gain support from a take-home video available in nine languages. A rotation of literary-acclaimed children's books

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will introduce children to language, rhymes and a love of reading that will help them become able readers as they grow. According to Muffy Berryhill, executive director of First 5 Shasta, “The program enables child care providers to become early literacy ambassadors, facilitating the shared book experience, an activity identified as the single greatest contributor to early literacy.” Upon completion of the book rotation cycle, children will be awarded their own blue book bag and encouraged to visit local libraries to continue borrowing books.

Partnership discussions began in April 2004, followed by a six-month process of soliciting input from community leaders, early care leaders and children’s advocates about implementation of the program. The First 5 Shasta Commission approved the partnership at its December meeting. The McConnell Foundation’s education program officer, Kelly Salter, indicates “Both partners will remain actively involved in the *Raising A Reader* project. Both organizations will contribute financially and also will be represented on an advisory group convened to help guide the project.”

The McConnell Foundation has invested \$550,000 in the project; First 5 Shasta has invested \$500,000. First 5 Shasta will assume responsibility for contract management and oversight, contracting with a local agency to implement the program county-wide. By July 2005, the program should be launched and red book bags will begin appearing throughout the community.

First 5 Shasta was established in 1999 following the passage of Proposition 10 by California voters. Proposition 10 added a 50-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to support programs for expectant parents and children ages 0-to-5. For more information about First 5 Shasta, please visit www.First5Shasta.org.

The McConnell Foundation is a private, independent foundation whose mission is to help build better communities through philanthropy. For more information about the McConnell Foundation, please visit www.mcconnellfoundation.org.

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